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SUBJECT: TUNISIA AND FREEDOM: I HAVE A DREAM -- DEFERRED  
(PART ONE)

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

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SUMMARY  
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11. (S) Fifty years after independence, Tunisia's freedom deficit is impeding its political, economic and social modernization. For years, Tunisia was a model for Arab and African countries. Tunisians took pride in having established many of the political institutions of a modern democracy and saw themselves moving methodically forward. Tunisia also played an important, and generally moderate, role internationally. However, twenty years of rule by President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali have created a quagmire of control and statist policies that lead many to question whether Tunisia is progressing at all. Meanwhile, high unemployment among educated youth and the siren call of "Islamism" in the local and pan-Arab media is encouraging some to choose extremism. US Government efforts to encourage reform and liberalization meet the same stale GOT response that is recycled ad nauseam for Tunisians. The challenge for the United States is to persuade GOT leaders that their policies are failing and that only increased freedom will secure Tunisia's future as a moderate, secular and developed country. It is worth the effort, for Tunisia today is near a tipping point. If freedom is permitted to flourish, Tunisians could succeed quickly and spread their moderate world view. Continuing the status quo, however, may lead to greater extremism and instability.

12. (S) This is the first of two cables outlining the challenges in Tunisia and ways the US Government can encourage change. Part one addresses why the Tunisian model has lost its shine. END SUMMARY.

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THE EAGLE: TUNISIA SOARS  
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13. (S) Thanks to the vision and leadership of Habib Bourguiba, the first of only two Tunisian presidents, in the post-independence period Tunisia developed much more quickly than its Arab and African neighbors. The country's brisk development led to the closure of the USAID mission in the 1990s. Nearly 80 percent of Tunisians live in a family-owned home and a similar percentage is considered middle class. Tunisia enjoys a high rate of literacy (74 percent) and its homogenous and well-educated populace benefits from modern

health facilities and social programs. The legal system is relatively well-developed and the political system is well-organized, including the Parliament, multiple political parties and elections.

¶4. (S) Women's rights in Tunisia were advanced through liberal legislation that in most areas no longer conforms to Sharia law, and women have achieved a level of integration comparable with many Western nations. Tunisia has encouraged religious tolerance, particularly peaceful coexistence with its historical Jewish community. Tunisia's historic stability and development contributed to an international reputation as a modern, liberal state. Tunisia has played a moderating role in many regional and international issues, including the Middle East Peace Process. Thus, on the surface, Tunisia is a political, economic and social model for developing countries around the world. However, today's Tunisia lacks fundamental freedoms and public debate that, if added to this solid base of achievements, would catapult the country into the cadre of developed nations.

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THE OSTRICH: TUNISIA'S LEADERS TURN INWARD  
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¶5. (S) While President Ben Ali's 1987 palace coup was expected to solidify Tunisia's rapid ascent to the first world, 20 years after the "Blessed Change" many question if Tunisia is moving forward at all. Ben Ali, who came up through the Ministry of Interior ranks, initially reached out to the Tunisian public and was welcomed as a younger more dynamic leader by a country that had grown weary of Bourguiba's reign. However, as Algeria struggled with

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Islamists in the 1990s, Ben Ali became increasingly risk averse. As the years passed, it became apparent that he lacked the strong vision and leadership that marked the Bourguiba period. Today, Ben Ali is nearly silent on the international scene, with engagement limited to minor visits and bland statements. Domestically, decision-making is stalled and reforms are glacial. Ben Ali's only interest, it seems, is to stay in power.

¶6. (S) Even as his rhetoric continues to be progressive, Ben Ali's age and rumored ailments suggest that he cannot personally lead the country forward. It is unclear how aware Ben Ali is that his regime has lost its luster; his public events are limited and participation is tightly controlled. What is clear is that Ben Ali is no longer the sole decision maker. It appears that a small group of officials, perhaps including his wife Leila Ben Ali and Presidential Advisor Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, exerts significant influence over policy. And yet in late 2006 GOT-loyal government and private institutions began to call on Ben Ali to run for president again in 2009. While the motivations for this are unclear, such calls inhibit other potentially credible candidates. Obsessive regime control has prevented any potential rival, successor or reformer from coming to the forefront.

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GOT: "WE HAVE A PLAN"  
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¶7. (S) Meanwhile, official talking points seem to exist in a time warp, with little reference to the march of globalization and a disregard for the speed of today's world economy and political realities. Rather, almost all GOT officials drone on about "the accomplishments," "the plan" and "our pace" (aka "control"). Officials admit Tunisia is moving slowly and is not ready for EU membership, for example, but assert that the country is still years ahead of its Arab and African neighbors. However, positive steps (e.g., the establishment of a new political party) are usually accompanied by more control (e.g., preventing the creation of a new labor union). Seemingly content to rest on

their laurels, and supported by European allies that value stability above reform, officials seem almost oblivious to the ugly reality of GOT control. Domestic and international observers express exasperation with everything from the vacuous local media to GOT procedural regulations on exchange transactions, blocked websites, and the absence of foreign franchises.

18. (S) Officials complain that these observers suffer from an expectations gap, and are focusing on the negative instead of the country's achievements. The GOT is hypersensitive to criticism and above all else wants foreign partners (including the United States) to offer public recognition for Tunisia's achievements and little else. The GOT is not inherently anti-American, although its controlling tendencies sometimes seem to encourage extreme nationalist ideas. The GOT tries particularly to control moderate, Western political opposition, and senior officials openly suggest that engaging foreign embassies is akin to treason. More generally, Tunisia's approach to its bilateral and multilateral relations can be summed up with, "If you can't say something nice about Tunisia, don't say anything at all."

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THE PARADOX: SUPPORT FOR BEN ALI REMAINS  
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19. (S) While one might conclude that this stagnation may herald the "fin du regne", in fact many Tunisians continue to support Ben Ali as a leader. Conservative by nature, Tunisians value the stability, quality of life and social rights achieved since independence. Some secular Tunisians say the country simply needs Ben Ali to be more reform minded and proactive, which could spur the country out of its doldrums. At the same time, growing numbers of citizens are tired of the continued rhetoric of democracy, social progress and economic growth, especially when they see that GOT decision-making and implementation fail to support Ben Ali's stated objectives. In today's globalized world people have increasing access to information and to alternative views -- even in Tunisia. The spread and influence of pan-Arab

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satellite television has opened Tunisians' eyes to development in the rest of the Arab world, as well as provided insight into competing visions: extremism, liberalism, consumerism. Most of all, however, this access to information is probably reinforcing a turn toward Islam as the source of answers to life's questions. So, rather than a dynamic "Partly Free" Singapore, Tunisia looks -- and sounds -- increasingly like a drab Soviet Union. When the GOT says its plan and path are clear, Tunisians now have something to compare it to; more and more are coming away dissatisfied.

110. (S) Further, people complain -- increasingly openly -- that Ben Ali, or at least the Trabelsi family of First Lady Leila Ben Ali, is benefiting from increasing corruption. Such comments are largely made in private, however, because few in civil society -- and none inside the government -- are willing to engage in serious and open discourse about Tunisia's political future. The GOT has encouraged this reticence through procedural and de facto limitations on freedom of expression and association, which have created a culture of paranoia. As was the case in Soviet states, people fear that even their own friends and family are informers for the GOT. Independent civil society activists are limited in numbers, organization and influence, yet the GOT insists on controlling every aspect of their political participation. Self-censorship, which is assumed in the Tunisian press, only further retards the pace of change. At the same time, the majority of Tunisians are apolitical and accustomed to a hierarchical system. Thus, the country is without a leader or a critical mass of citizens to demand a change, even in the face of growing unease with the status quo.

¶11. (S) Meanwhile, the numbers of Tunisian youth are growing, even as their prospects for economic prosperity are dwindling. Official statistics reveal that more than 85,000 new jobs will be needed annually in the coming ten years, although the current level of GDP growth (approximately five percent) is insufficient to meet this demand. The reality of these numbers is all too apparent in today's Tunisia, where young men spend their days sitting idly in cafes watching al-Jazeera. Similarly, Tunisians report that young women are at home watching conservative religious satellite programs and increasingly wearing the veil. Given these demographics, it was little surprise that the GOT uncovered a "Salafist" terrorist network at the end of 2006 that resulted in the arrest of hundreds of young people across the country.

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THE FUTURE: I'VE SEE THE ENEMY AND IT IS US  
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¶12. (S) The stagnation of Tunisian society combined with this recent security incident indicate that the status quo is increasingly unstable. No one knows the extent of Tunisian support for a greater role for religion in governance, but it is certainly considerable and growing. Moreover, there are indications that Osama bin Laden and Hassan Nasrallah are more popular than the regime might admit or be comfortable about. Tunisians also watch a great deal of pan-Arab satellite television, which tends to reinforce the message that Islam is under attack from the West. But the GOT continues to believe heavy-handed security controls and social and economic growth will suffice in combating this trend. While the stated target is Islamic extremists, security crackdowns have also become a tool of political convenience and are applied to every dissenting voice. The GOT does not appreciate that the continuation of its controlling and repressive policies encourages extremism. At the same time, the GOT-influenced press fawns over the Iraqi resistance, Hezbollah and other forms of anti-Western extremism, perhaps solely to distract the public from the government's own shortcomings. Increased openness domestically and expanded cooperation with counter-terrorism partners have been ignored as options, since they require giving up small measures of control.

¶13. (S) Given Tunisia's history, it is unlikely that a fundamentalist movement will gain sufficient support in the short- to medium-term to overthrow the existing political structures, including Ben Ali. And free, fair and participatory elections would likely lead to Ben Ali's

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reelection (albeit with much smaller margins than the ninety-plus percentages of recent years), not the rise of an Islamist government. However, it is unclear how long this will be true. If the GOT does not continue to deliver improving standards of living or government services, another entity may step into the fold to meet these needs. The GOT's failure to permit freedom of expression has also led to a situation in which the average Tunisian is increasingly influenced by Islamist media -- whose anti-Western slant ultimately represents not a safety valve, but a threat to the secular Ben Ali regime.

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WHAT'S AT STAKE: WHY TUNISIA MATTERS  
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¶14. (S) Even so, the majority of Tunisians are moderate, neutral, and hold informed and reasonable views on domestic and international issues. The probability for success remains very high, and the fruits of Tunisia's past progress are impressive. Tunisia is already sharing its technical knowledge with less developed sub-Saharan nations, while considering official technical support for Iraqi officials. Clearly the country needs dynamic leadership to achieve its potential. Many Tunisians believe that, with a little

encouragement, the country could easily be transformed into a model of Arab democracy that could spread its moderate views on religion, women and secularism.

¶15. (S) The freedom deficit in Tunisia today is stark and is the target of our Freedom Agenda goals. Tunisia today faces a choice -- maintain the status quo or loosen the reins and trust that greater freedom will encourage Tunisians to build on what they already have. Ben Ali, who has almost three years of his current presidential term remaining and could be in power much longer, must choose. But we see nothing that leads us to believe he will choose greater openness, unless he can be convinced that his legacy is at stake. We need to convey to Ben Ali and others that the current path may lead Tunisia into the abyss of regional extremism. Our goal must be to encourage the regime to permit more freedom and faster, while encouraging greater cooperation and participation. Part two of this series will examine how the USG can encourage Tunisia to become the domestic and international model it has the potential to be.

GODEC